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ABSTRACT

Rural special educators play a very complex role in the provision of services to exceptional learners. Population sparsity and distance factors more or less mandate that most rural special education programs must be cross-categorical, multi-age programs. These same factors, and the fact that support specialists in related areas are nonexistent or available on an extremely limited basis, accent the need for rural special educators to have competencies in: general information; knowledge of legislative and legal ramifications; assessment; instructional and monitoring processes; communicating with parents; communicating with other professionals; coordination, collaboration, and consultation; and planning for personal and professional renewal. Competencies applied in rural settings take on different meanings than when applied in urban areas. Further, competency specifications have direct implications for both preservice and inservice efforts. The need for strong rural special education services can no longer be denied; excellent special educators play a major and critical role in the delivery of services to the exceptional learner. Hopefully, excellent special educators prepared to serve in rural areas can help to lessen the double disadvantage experienced by rural exceptional individuals and provide the impetus for more concentrated efforts for rural schools. (Author/BRR)

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COMPETENCIES AND NEEDS OF RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

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COMPETENCIES AND NEEDS OF RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Implementing comprehensive special education programs in compliance with PL 94-142 has proved to be difficult for most school districts but particularly so for those in rural areas. An important link in appropriate education services in rural areas is the special education teacher, who all too frequently migrates to the city after one or two years (Schrag, Farago, & Walker, 1979). To understand why the attrition rate for teachers is so high, one must have an understanding of the state of the art pertaining to special education in rural areas.

Much attention has been given to the educational crisis in urban areas over the past decade or so but meager efforts have been centered on the rural educational crisis. Yet, approximately 32 percent of all school children were enrolled in nonmetropolitan schools (Helge, 1979). Muse (1977) indicated that nonmetropolitan districts are those districts outside of counties containing a city of 50,000 or more population. In addition, 5.3 percent of rural children were not enrolled in school (Sher & Rosenfeld, 1977). Schrag, Farago, and Walker (1979) reported that this rate was twice that of urban areas and suggested that reasons for this revolved around lack of available special education programs, the poor quality of existing special education programs, the tendency to "hide" handicapped children, and basic communication problems. Heller (1975) stated that handicapped children residing in rural areas were doubly disadvantaged: the handicap itself and the lack of appropriate services to address the handicap.

While no national rural education policy exists and while rural areas are extremely diverse across the United States, several characteristics routinely emerge that directly affect the quantity and quality of special

education services provided (Helge, 1979; Heller, 1975; Muse, 1977; Schrag, Farago, & Walker, 1979; Sher & Rosenfeld, 1977). A quick glance indicates that the limitations are more numerous than the advantages.

Set I ---- POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS

- A. Slower paced and less pressured atmosphere
- B. Spirit of community cooperation
- C. Opportunities for leadership development
- D. Less formal interactions among students, staff, and parents
- E. Friendly, close-based educational organization (not so bureaucratically hampered)

Set II ---- LIMITING CHARACTERISTICS

- A. Low population density
- B. Transportation problems
- C. Lack of adequate financial base
- D. Higher rate of poverty
- E. Migration of young people to urban areas
- F. Poorer housing standards
- G. Fewer cultural attractions
- H. Inability to recruit and retain quality personnel
- I. For single personnel, less opportunity for social stimulation
- J. Less opportunity for adequate medical care
- K. Limited access to human support services
- L. Resistance to change (tradition bound); suspicion of outside interference
- M. Lack of awareness of alternative and creative ways to use existing resources and manpower

- N. Inbreeding of personnel
- O. Low levels of educational achievement
- P. Professional renewal and isolation problems
- Q. Teachers more accountable to community than in urban areas
(community surveillance)
- R. Outdated and limited educational materials
- S. Heavy teaching loads
- T. Teacher considered "all things to all people"
- U. Poor quality of instruction that exists

In analyzing these two lists of characteristics, it should be emphasized that (a) not all rural schools fit the limitations expressed, (b) rural schools are different entities from suburban and urban schools, (c) the uniqueness of rural schools must be considered and addressed in teacher education programs, (d) the positive aspects can be used to assist in overcoming some of the limiting ones, and (e) the role and responsibilities of rural special education personnel are directly affected by both sets of characteristics.

The special education teacher prepared in most teacher education programs usually does not have exposure to the unique and different aspects of rural culture and practices. It is no wonder that some of the problems encountered by such teachers cause flight to more heavily populated areas. Interestingly, both Helge (1979) and Schrag et al. (1979) noted that most rural teachers were products of rural areas themselves. Helge (1979) pointed out that this factor may be responsible for lowering standards as it limits perspectives and projections for improving services as well as perpetuates the status quo and lack of diversity that could exist given the local

resources available.

Of necessity, most rural special education programs must be cross-categorical, multi-age programs. The population sparsity and distance factors more or less mandate this. Training, then, must prepare rural special educators to "function across traditional categories in a variety of educational environments" (Gargiulo & Swartz, 1977, p. 24). Harris and Mahar (1975) further indicated that rural special education teachers will work with children who exhibit a wide range of learning and behavioral problems. Realistically, "pure" categories appear to be educationally irrelevant, particularly in rural areas (Helge, 1979; Smith & Neisworth, 1977, p. 8). Therefore, the teacher with a specialty in mental retardation serving as either a self-contained class teacher or resource teacher may find that his/her students represent several categories. For example, a self-contained class with two students who are educable mentally handicapped; four language/learning disabled; three behaviorally disordered; one partially seeing; one physically impaired using braces and crutches; and one hearing impaired using amplification. Compound this by age ranges from five to twelve. In some rooms, the age range covers the gamut of the school-aged population, all with different needs and levels of functioning.

Some training programs are addressing these types of delivery services but too many are still using an urban model. Such programs have been competency based or performance based programs for the most part (Edgar & Neel, 1976; Gargiulo & Swartz, 1977; Holmgren & Firth, 1976; Hunsaker & Sigler, 1979; McDonald, 1978; Muse, 1977; Non-Categorical Competency Based, 1973). Generic training virtually mandates the need for ongoing advanced inservice training in the more specialized areas of predominant handicapping

condition being serviced. Again, securing relevant inservice training has posed a problem for rural schools.

A further concern of the rural special educator is that support specialists in related areas are nonexistent or available on an extremely limited basis. This means that the special educator often must be responsible for the related services implementation with minimal direction. Speech and language therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, etc. have not been attracted to rural areas, and their services are often on a contractual basis through state and regional agencies. Often, the special educator has students from the time they arrive in the morning (often after a long bus ride) until they leave in the afternoon with no breaks and little, if any, assistance. They provide art, music, physical education, health services, social services, and counseling to their students. For this heavy work load, they are usually paid considerably less (Schrag, et al. (1979) stated that the average rural salary was \$2400 less than the national average), have minimal materials and equipment to use, have limited opportunity for professional interaction, and often have what they perceive as little administrative support. Again, one must not generalize the above statements to all rural schools, but such circumstances apparently occur far too frequently. Stress is paramount and often the special educators experience "burn out" unless steps are taken to remove the isolation, reduce the stress, and provide interactive support.

Secondary special educators should have a different focus from elementary special educators. Their efforts should be spent largely in preparing adolescents to cope with daily living, to develop occupational skills, and to deal with psychosocial problems. In addition, functional reading,

mathematics, and language skills should be a part of their program but not at the expense of career education and job skills orientation and acquisition (Miller, Sabatino, & Larsen, 1980). However, special education has not developed strong secondary programmatic efforts and most universities do little in this area.

Competency-based training has elicited many competencies deemed necessary for the special educator. In specifying those critical to the rural special educator, various competency specifications were collected and analyzed (Black, Kokaska, & Nelson, 1973; Capie, Anderson, Johnson, & Ellett, 1979; Freeman & Becker, 1979; Code of Ethics, 1978; Gargiulo & Pigge, 1979; Gorelick, 1974; Hunsaker & Sigler; Looney, 1978; Padzensky, Gibson, & Sporn, 1974; Strauch & Pecheone, n.d.; Stulac & Boutselis, 1978; Sultana & Saunders, 1980; Non-Categorical Competency Based, 1973; Van Nagel, Siudzinski, D'Zamko, Gonzales, & Serwatka, 1976). The specifications came from both categorical and noncategorical approaches, from both urban and rural service areas, and from practicing special educators. It is recognized that competency based education has limitations inherent in an imperfect system (Dunn, 1980), but such specifications have value in helping to define and determine critical elements, to develop ways to measure or evaluate the acquisition of these elements, and to lead to more relevant and realistic planning and implementation efforts on the part of training institutions, local school districts, and special educators themselves. Perhaps through the use of such specifications, rural special educators can prepare themselves to cope with both the "reality shock" and "cultural shock" associated with rural teaching. Let it be said that while technical competencies are important, human qualities are equally as important. Just having technical competencies does not guarantee an

effective teacher. However, effective teachers are usually competent teachers. The human qualities of caring, motivation, creativity, and dedication do influence the quality of instruction. A good teacher is not satisfied with anything but good performance and will constantly strive to reach that level.

The following set of competencies evolved from the aforementioned analysis. They are offered as tentative direction finders and not absolutes. It is unlikely that any one educator will have all of the competencies. Further, each competency will have varying degrees of expertise within it. No attempt has been made to delineate these degrees. The competencies are organized according to major headings and stated in a general way. An elaboration follows each stated competency. Since each could result in different avenues in its measurement, the specific job role and the uniqueness of the particular rural setting should be considered when determining the level of competency needed.

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

---Specifies the characteristics of the various categories of exceptionality

As a rural special educator, one can expect to work with any of the various exceptionalities. This is basic knowledge to any special educator, but the rural one must be able to assist in overall awareness and the referral process for regular educators.

---Specifies the instructional and behavioral needs of exceptional children

This is a general need competency and serves as the framework on which to build the specific, individual needs of the learners. This competency is cross-categorical in nature.

---Delineates the prevalence/incidence figures of the various exceptionalities

This competency can help curb the inappropriate placement of students. Often the special educator is the only one with this information. It may also assist in the delivery of services previously unrecognized: "We have no gifted children in our district."

---Specification of normal child development milestones

This is particularly important when working with young children. Deviations from normal development are used as "measuring sticks" for the identification and progress of young, handicapped children. How can one help the learner reach his potential if one has no knowledge of the direction in which he/she is headed? What constitutes a language problem for the seven-year-old?

---Traces the history of special education in general and the different categories in particular as to theoretical, social, medical, and legal implications

Many rural areas are not aware of the recent changes that have occurred in special education. For example, process remediation appears to be less effective than the academic approach for learning disabled (Freeman & Becker, 1979; Mercer, 1979, pp. 66-70).

---Commitment to the concept of individual differences

We all function at different levels in different skill areas. We are at different places on the various skill continua, good in some areas, mediocre in others, poor in another. The acceptance of differences is as critical to the special educator as it is to the regular educator. The modeling aspect is paramount to both students and adults.

---Description of the many alternatives and options for providing the delivery of special education services

Rural areas tend to be unaware of alternatives other than the self-contained special class. Therefore, it behooves the special educator to have an awareness of options such as the teacher consultant (Little, 1977, 1978); the resource teacher (Wiederholt, Tammill, & Brown, 1978); the responsive teacher (Robie, Pierce, & Burdett, 1979); the helping teacher/crisis teacher (Morse, 1976); and resource schools (Affleck, Lehning, & Brow, 1973).

---Awareness of family attitudes and pressures in coping with an exceptional child

The special educator sends the child home at the end of the day. The parents have the child and his attendant concerns all the time. Preservice programs could incorporate an activity such as taking a handicapped child for a 24-hour period and assuming full responsibility for him/her as a means to build awareness of what it is like to have a handicapped child. Such activity would include shopping, church, the daily living activities that a parent would have. The worries, fears, and concerns soon surface.

---Awareness of the role of cultural/linguistic factors in special education

Many rural areas have culturally different populations within their boundaries. Cultural/linguistic differences can affect scores on intelligence and achievement tests. Children may be misplaced because of these differences. Behaviors appropriate in one culture may not be so in another. Instructional intervention must take these differences into account.

---Understanding of the IEP process and the development of the components of the IEP document

The IEP process commences the moment the learner is referred, and the quality of the various sections of the document flow from one aspect to the other. Goals develop from the current level of functioning, and objectives develop from the goals. The IEP is a management tool and not a mental exercise on paper to fulfill the requirements of federal and state regulations. Each child's IEP should be geared to him/her and not be a "carbon copy" of a group program. Many times the IEP is developed totally by the special educator as the multidisciplinary team approach is not existent, available, or practiced.

---Awareness of what mainstreaming is and is not

Too often mainstreaming is "dumping" rather than providing an appropriate instructional program for a learner in the least restrictive environment. "Dumping" may lead to the most restrictive environment. The special educator often is the only support given to the regular educator in the daily efforts in integrating.

II. LEGISLATIVE AND LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS

---Understands the provisions of PL 94-142 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

The special educator often provides leadership in the compliance with these two laws. Many administrators have limited knowledge about special education as they have had no training in this area and turn to the special educator to render assistance. Inadvertently, classroom practices may develop that are in direct opposition to the legal

requirements because the teacher did not know what the requirements were.

---Understands the provision of the specific state regulations and guidelines

Each state has developed regulations and guidelines to provide special education services. New Mexico has not "gone with" PL 94-142 but its regulations cover most of the aspects of the law. Since these regulations vary from state to state, the special educator needs to become very familiar with those in his/her state so as to plan, develop, and implement his/her services in accordance with them.

II. ASSESSMENT

---Awareness that assessment is two-pronged with the ultimate goal being an appropriate educational program for the learner

Formal standardized tests are used to determine the child's eligibility for special education services. These instruments yield information for that purpose and often are too general to pinpoint specific areas of instructional need. Usually, other instruments of an informal nature must be given (generally by the teacher) before one can generate a clear picture of the learner's demonstrated strengths and weaknesses.

---Ability to interpret information from standardized tests and determine what is relevant to instructional planning and management

Scores, in and of themselves, provide only general direction. The ability to interpret standardized test performances from several sources (medical reports, language assessment, etc.) is crucial to individual program needs. Often this requires a careful study of the particular

instruments to determine how they measure an area. For example, the reading score on the Wide Range Achievement Test deals only with letter recognition and word recognition. Comprehension is not measured. Administering the tests is important, but interpreting them is even more important. We often have "testing overkill" when batteries are used without consideration of the referral clues. Needed information may have to be spelled out for educational diagnosticians, school psychologists, and other members of the evaluation team.

---Ability to administer and interpret standardized tests needed to gather additional information

Often the 2.4 grade equivalent earned on the Peabody Individual Achievement Test math subtest does not give one the direction needed to develop goals and objectives. It may need to be supplemented with a Key Math test before this information is forthcoming. Rural districts may contract for diagnostic services, share a regional diagnostician, or be inundated with referrals so that a diagnostician is not available for the additional needed testing. The special educator should be familiar with tests used in special education that do not require a specially trained person for use: Key Math, Durrell Analysis of Reading Difficulty, Woodcock Reading Tests, Metropolitan Instructional Achievement Tests, and Brigance, for example. The special educator must be able to administer and interpret instruments of this type for he/she is the one who usually does the additional programmatic assessment.

---Ability to design and/or conduct informal assessment to obtain needed information for instructional programming

The special educator should be able to use criterion-referenced tests,

scope and sequence charts, developmental scales, checklists, interviews, inventories, systematic observation, applied behavioral analysis, diagnostic teaching, and/or anecdotal records to determine individual academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses. Together with formal assessment information, these data become the current level of functioning component on the IEP document and should be stated as behavioral descriptions. In this way, logical goals can be generated.

---Awareness of the strengths, limitations, and cautions of both formal and informal assessment

Issues such as validity, reliability, norming, bias, and the like should be addressed within this competency. The necessity to use findings as indicators rather than absolutes is stressed. There is a tendency to overrely on test scores without searching for corroborating evidence. Turnbull, Strickland, and Brantley (1978) reported that a large number of the tests used for determining eligibility and programming status have validity, reliability, norming, or other problems that pose weighty questions about the use of the results in special education decision-making.

---Ability to determine learning styles, potential reinforcers, and rates of learning

The special educator needs to be astute in analyzing the effects of the instructional setting, the instructor, the grouping and type of instruction, the learning modalities, the stimulus and response characteristics of instructional materials and activities, the number and intensity of presentations needed, the type of feedback and reinforcement under which the learner functions well and poorly. This

aspect of assessment examines how the student learns rather than what he has learned. Not all learning difficulties ensue from within the child; many are forced upon him by the classroom environment, school environment, teacher-student interactions, and peer interactions.

IV. INSTRUCTIONAL AND MONITORING PROCESS

---Ability to translate assessment data into terms of current level of functioning, the foundation or base for instructional programming

While this competency is conceptualized as a team effort, often the rural special educator has the sole responsibility for accomplishing this task. Therefore, this must become a target area in the preservice and/or inservice training.

---Ability to develop instructional goals from the specified current level of performance

Current levels of performance should be stated as behavioral descriptions of both the individual's strengths and weaknesses. Both strengths and weaknesses should result in goals, as strengths should be maintained and used as stepping stones while weaknesses need to be ameliorated or remedied. Again, the rural educator often has the sole responsibility for this task(s).

---Ability to develop milestone or short term objectives for each goal

This competency has imbedded within it the application of task analysis as well as sequencing the smaller units in an educationally sound or logical hierarchy. Since no arbitrary skill hierarchy exists, the special educator will need to utilize scope and sequence charts, checklists, and inventories, plus a lot of common sense to determine

the short term objectives. One must look at prerequisite skills necessary for each short term objective. If these are not within the repertoire of the learner, the objectives may be too ambitious. At least four or five should be specified for each goal. Again, the teacher may have the sole responsibility for this task.

---Ability to prioritize the child's instructional needs based on input from parents, other teachers, related services, and the learner himself

Often, others have relevant information that may be overlooked in the prevailing practice of having the special educator develop the IEP. If others rubber stamp the IEP, then the teacher must actively solicit the involvement of these people and take the initiative in developing a team approach, albeit without formal structure.

---Awareness of what constitutes a relevant curriculum based on age, level of independence, individual strengths and weaknesses, and current research

This competency requires a broad based knowledge of the curricular content of subject matter areas, vocational education, affective education, language acquisition and development, motor areas, self-help skills, and the related services areas. Judgments will need to be made as to what are the most relevant areas that will lead to the highest level of self-supporting, self-sustaining adulthood for the individual.

---Knowledge of instructional management systems

Much help is available to the special educator through the use of management tools such as IBAS, System FORE, Wisconsin Design, Target II,

STAMM, and Pegasus Pace. Such systems provide objectives, assessment instruments, correlated activities and/or instructional materials, and record keeping systems.

---Possesses a repertoire of instructional methods, techniques, and strategies in the various content and behavioral areas

The rural educator serves cross-categorical, multi-age groups as a general rule. Therefore, a variety of methods must be available. Further, no categorically specific methods appear to exist, and no one method works for all. Both developmental and remedial approaches should be included in this repertoire. It seems criminal to expose the teacher and thus the learner only to Distar Language and not to the approaches of Bangs (1968), Wiig and Semel (1976, 1980), Berry (1969) or those used by linguists. Special educators must assume responsibility for making this a continuous, ongoing process.

---Acquires a broad based knowledge of instructional materials and media across all content areas

The same observation as noted in the previous competency applies here. Granted, one may have limited materials available but more could be procured through regional materials centers, service clubs, and supplemental sources. If more instructional materials were available, what would one select or order?

---Ability to analyze expediently and objectively instructional material and media

A system for analyzing materials must be developed. Such items as level, objectives, organization, input and output characteristics, format, feedback and teacher requirements need to be considered as

well as physical characteristics.

---Ability to match instructional activities and materials to meet individual needs

This competency requires the special educator to analyze the learner first and then select materials to fit him rather than trying to plug the learner into an instructional material. This is part of individualized instruction where the objectives, style of learning, and learning pace are built-in demands for the selection of the tools to use in teaching the learner. It is rare that a whole group will be using the same material. It is better to purchase fewer copies of texts and workbooks and have a greater variety by using some of the allotted money for other types of supportive or extending materials.

---Ability to adapt or modify instructional materials to meet individual needs

Materials will always need to be adapted or modified to use with certain learners. Worksheets may need to be cut apart to provide smaller units of work. Reading material may need to be taped so that both the auditory and visual channels can be used. Directions may need to be changed. Language may need to be simplified. Pacing may need to be adjusted. Frills may need to be eliminated or important concepts may need to be practiced in more contexts. These are only a few of the many possibilities for adaptation and modification that exist.

---Ability to design and construct instructional materials to meet individual needs

With the dearth of current and appropriate materials in many rural schools, the special educator, of necessity, will have to create his/her

own materials. Regional teacher centers often have idea books along with needed construction materials and equipment. Some areas have used volunteers to construct materials once they have been designed. All input modalities need to be considered as well as different response modes when building materials. Teacher-made materials often have a particular appeal to learners. Ways to budget time and materials for construction need to be explored.

---Knowledge of audio-visual equipment potential for direct or indirect assistance to students

Filmstrip projectors, cassette recorder/players, listening centers, audio card readers, overhead projectors, and movie projectors are usually available somewhere in the building. Such items greatly assist the individualization process. Laminators are invaluable when it comes to adding durability and multiple use factors to teacher-made materials. Photographic equipment, microcomputers, and video players all have potential. Computer assisted instruction and telecommunications can expand services (Tawney, Aeschelman, & Deaton, 1979). One of the basic problems is that no one knows how to use them so they are not used or procured. Preparing cards for a Language Master and using an overhead projector to teach shape recognition are examples of expanding services through audio-visual equipment.

---Ability to group students in flexible ways to serve children who are working in the same area or objective

Many teachers have the concept that individualized instruction means one-to-one instruction. However, many types of instruction are included. Some is independent; some is small group; some is large group.

Groupings should change as learners progress or needs vary. Language instruction and social interaction do not occur in a vacuum. A great amount of informal assessment occurs in group situations as well as individual sessions. If one is fortunate enough to have an aide, more groupings can occur at one time. Special education learners need to assume as much responsibility for their own learning as they can handle.

---Ability to motivate learners

This can be an extremely difficult task as poverty, inability to see meaning in educational endeavors, and withdrawn or aggressive behaviors present a challenge often not addressed in teacher education. Using the interests of the learners in developing instructional activities can be a motivator. Johnny lives for horses so use horses to "turn him on" to reading, math, art, or whatever. Behavior management techniques and success experiences may produce a heightened motivation for learning.

---Ability to analyze antecedent conditions and consequences of responses to design an appropriate classroom environment for each learner

One must analyze what perpetuates inappropriate behavior and stultifies appropriate behavior. A thorough grounding in behavior management and/or contingency management is required to meet this competency. Appropriate behaviors need to be positively reinforced while inappropriate behaviors need to be ignored or negatively reinforced. However, in order to do this, one must be able to pinpoint what initiates or perpetuates behavior in both the academic sense and the behavioral sense. Charting, graphing, reinforcement schedules, and types of reinforcers should be

in evidence.

---Ability to incorporate individual learner problem-solving situations into the learning environment appropriate to the learner level of development

Too often special education students are viewed as incapable of handling problem-solving approaches. Consequently, they become dependent upon others to think for them or develop strategies that are ineffective because they are not aware of alternatives. How can we get Rebecca to stop spitting her milk? How can you avoid fighting with Charles while you wait for the bus to take you home? Learners need to be "pushed" to use their abilities. (Don't all of us?) Thinking skills are part of daily living at one level or another.

---Ability to maintain classroom order and discipline

Limits need to be clearly set and enforced. Again, contingency management is a tool to use. Special students will test the teacher the same as regular students. When students are active learners, fewer discipline problems ensue. Students can help develop classroom rules which can be posted for ready reference. Picture clues can be used if reading is a problem. Magic circle and class meetings can be used effectively to help students learn to manage themselves. Appropriate behaviors may need to be learned through direct instruction.

---Ability to organize the classroom environment so as to provide

- (a) appropriate routing through the various learning activities;
- (b) appropriate timing for movement from one activity to another;
- (c) avenues for both group and individual work; (d) ready access to
- needed materials and equipment; (e) opportunities to develop self-

management and independence; and (f) a pleasant, attractive, stimulating, and supportive atmosphere for students

Learning centers or work areas need to be developed with definite guidelines as to how to get from one center to another. Work folders or schedules may direct students to the necessary centers. Areas of the room should be specified and set aside for both group and individual work. Vertical space should be used as well as horizontal space. A quiet area with a rocking chair has proved effective. Most of all, the special educator needs to exude warmth and caring. Not always easy tasks!

---Ability to interact with learners in such a way as to enhance their self-concept and confidence

Many times special learners have low opinions of themselves and their abilities, frequently reinforced by others in their school and home environment. One must accentuate the positive even though the positive may be hard to find at times. The affective domain can never be divorced from the cognitive and psychomotor areas. This is a WHOLE learner not a series of fragmented parts. Success experiences help build self-concept. How does one set up such experiences? Build, build, build! One should be aware that acting out behavior often masks a flattened self-concept.

---Ability to address the IEP objectives through the daily instruction and still capitalize on unexpected interests and events

Many special educators feel they cannot explore or capitalize on things that are not specified in the IEP: a storm comes; the fire engine goes by; a death occurs; a new baby is born; Abel's grandparents come to

visit; a National Assemblies program is scheduled. All of these are teaching situations, and one should capitalize on the interest and eagerness of the moment. The IEP cannot specify everything the learner will experience. It looks at milestone objectives, and there are many ways to get to these objectives. Creativity should be encouraged on the part of both the learners and the teacher. IEPs are not daily lesson plans; rather they are management tools. This is fortunate for the IEP would be several inches thick and too cumbersome to use if it detailed everything to which the learner would be exposed.

---Ability to promote transfer and generalization of skills and concepts taught

Unless the IEP objectives are integrated into the total teaching efforts, fragmented learning results. The learner should practice and apply new skills and concepts in various settings, modes, and ways. Previously learned skills and concepts should be tied to new ones. One must use the learner's experiences to bring meaning to all learning and tie new learning to something he/she knows in his/her own reality. It is necessary to integrate, explain, and show relationships constantly. One must directly teach transfer and generalization. Last week our plant died because we didn't water it. What do we need to do to the new plant before we leave for the weekend? Again, and again, and again!

---Ability to complete routine classroom responsibilities

Such things as collection of milk money, daily attendance recording, lunch count, attendance to duty schedule, and housekeeping chores are done with a minimum amount of disruption. Often students, particularly older ones, may undertake some of the housekeeping duties as part of

their instructional program.

---Ability to provide feedback to learners so they know exactly where they stand in relation to progress on their instructional objectives

Students need to know how well they have done on their assigned tasks as soon after completion as possible. The special educator may circulate and provide on-the-spot feedback, or it may be delayed until something can be graded. Self-correction may be used as a strategy. Programmed learning is another approach. Students need to understand why errors were made and have assistance in correcting them. Often, graphs or charts are used with the student recording his/her own progress as he/she is able to assume this responsibility.

---Ability to determine when a learner can be integrated successfully into the regular classroom

Many learners are integrated in some areas. If so, when can he/she move into another area? If not integrated academically, when can he/she do so? The regular educator must consider the academic and behavioral requirements of the regular classroom in relation to the learner's skill and behavior level. What about his/her ability to work in a large group situation? The special educator may need to simulate the regular class as preparation for integration and gradually phase the learner into the regular class. The receiving teacher's tolerance level must be considered also.

---Ability to use data based monitoring to evaluate individual student progress through the specified instructional objectives

Data based monitoring is a continuous evaluation procedure in which the learner's daily progress is tabulated. The next day's instruction

is based on the present day's performance. The daily progress charts become records of the mastery or lack of mastery of the IEP objectives. Such records usually involve the number of correct responses or number of errors and/or the rate of response. Such data may indicate the need to change a particular instructional strategy or instructional material.

---Ability to construct teacher-made tests or criterion-referenced instruments to measure progress

Many special educators must design their own assessment instruments as those available commercially do not match the learner's program. In other cases, they simply are not available because of financial constraints. Therefore, special educators must be able to design and construct their own to use as a means of documenting the mastery and retention of learned objectives.

---Ability to develop new goals and objectives when the specified ones have been met

Ideally, this should be a team decision but often it is delegated to the special educator. In essence, he/she uses the learned objectives as the basis for specifying new ones, taking into account new areas that may have priority now. Again, the special educator will secure input from significant others if no formal structure exists. This may be the annual review or it may be prior to that time if the student has mastered the specified objectives.

---Ability to prepare, maintain, and submit all reports required by local and state reporting systems

Paper work abounds for the rural special educator. Many times, the

administrator may ask the teacher to prepare all the reports necessary for state reporting as well as local reporting. The rationale for this is that the special educator has the specific information needed for the reports. It would be wise to determine the types of data one needs to collect early in the school year. Copies of submitted data should be made and retained for later reference in further reporting.

V. COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

---Communicates personal enthusiasm

The special educator conveys to parents a positive interest and concern for them and their child. Eye contact, facial expression, and body language all are indicators of pleasure, interest, concern, or lack of them. The enthusiasm must be genuine and permeating so as to build confidence and cooperation for joint efforts. In one's enthusiasm, false hope and promises should not be made. For example, eye training exercises, in and of themselves, seldom "cure" learning problems, so when a teacher makes wide sweeping promises and they do not come to fruition, problems result. In other words, honesty, objectivity, tact, and diplomacy are elements of enthusiasm.

---Describes the purposes, programs, and goals of special education to parents and additionally provides needed information to parents

The special educator must clarify his/her philosophy with the realism of the setting in order to succinctly and concisely share with parents the purpose, nature, and procedures of the program services. Technical language should be avoided; the use of layman's language promotes understanding. The purpose is not "to snow" them but to establish a two-way

communication system. They need to have specific information about their rights, due process, written permission to test and place, related services, regional or state support services, parent groups, etc. Often rural parents are unaware of their rights and the kinds of assistance that could be available to them. As a rule, chapters of ARC, ACLD, and TAG are not found in rural areas.

---Involves parents in establishing physical, cognitive, and affective goals for the learner

Often, rural parents assign the "expert" role to the special educator. "Whatever you say is fine with me (or us)." There may be this passive, nonquestioning approach, or there may appear to be total removal of the parent from any school-initiated solicitation for parent involvement. "I just can't get the parents to come and talk with me about Aurelia." One must remember that parents are people also and may have fears and needs, as well. Saettler (1978) indicated that teacher education programs must focus on communication not only with children and youth but additionally with adults. Eliciting from parents some specific home behavior they would like the learner to acquire or change or some task they want him/her to do can pave the way for conjoint efforts. The school instructional program should include intervention to address the expressed parental priorities.

---Provides feedback to parents on the learner's progress

Most parents are truly interested in their children but may have different ways of demonstrating their love and concern. Cultural patterns are involved frequently, so it behooves the special educator to become versed in the prevailing culture. Difference should not be construed

as deficiency. After all, it may be the special educator who is deficient in his understanding of what constitutes caring and the type of feedback that will be most effective. Checklists marked as to introducing, acquiring, and mastery often prove effective. Happy grams or certificates sent home frequently may be displayed proudly at home. Often feedback is provided informally at the grocery store, the basketball game, or a community function.

---Works to elicit and promote parent support for the special education program

As parents become more aware and informed as to their rights, to service alternatives, and to learner needs, they exert pressure. This may be disconcerting to some school administrators who have traditionally had a virtual monopoly in the school realm. The task here is to build advocates rather than adversaries, and the special educator has a major responsibility in the development of the positive team approach. The special educator and the parents work together to do what is best for the learner within the given local constraints. Parents can be instrumental in positive messages being sent and received through the rural grapevine, in constructing needed equipment and material, in garnering and using community resources, in short, in volunteering services in so many ways. One needs to capitalize on the closely knit, community cooperative spirit.

---Provides suggested activities and approaches to use at home with the learner

Many times, parents ask what they can do at home to assist the learner. However, at times they may be so involved in meeting daily living

requirements that they do not consider home assistance. Assistance may range from providing a ten-minute time period to interacting with their child to parent training programs. Toy libraries to be loaned, academic follow-up, reading to the learner, helping him/her use a saw may all become a part of this. Every special educator should be prepared to share activities that can be performed at home and have such organized and at his/her fingertips. Some prepare handbooks full of activities for specific areas that can be sent home.

VI. COMMUNICATION WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

---Interprets information supplied by specialists and translates it into instructional practices

The language of each specialty (psychologist, physician, occupational therapist) is unique to his/her field. Someone has to translate the specialized findings and determine if and how the information can be used in the instructional setting. Sometimes, the information provided cannot be used instructionally, and the special educator must realize this. Some reports may be full of circular language (the behaviors result in a label which precipitates the behaviors). The special educator needs to be familiar with the language of the specialty area. If this is not the case, then one should request assistance to acquire the skills necessary for translation. In other words, one must secure help when one is "in over his head and/or experience."

---Provides documented, objective, behavioral information to the various professional specialists

This competency is multi-faceted and requires observation skills,

diagnostic skills, and analysis and synthesis skills. The information is critical to the specialist as part of the referral process and often determines in large part the particular diagnostic or consultative approach needed and used. Usually, the information provided has been collected over time and should reflect more than "I think or I feel" approach. The quality of this information often determines the quality of the feedback information received from the specialist.

---Develops a working relationship with professional consultants so that individual programs can be developed and implemented

Particularly in the area of related services, the special educator is the implementer. The consultant teaches the special educator to provide the daily, ongoing intervention needed. By the same token, the teacher must be able to provide feedback as to the relative success of the intervention and request further assistance when needed. If such help comes from regional centers, time and transportation factors are involved, so telephone or telecommunication services could augment the two-way communication. Emergencies inevitably occur, so provisions must be made for handling them. One-shot consultation should be avoided, if at all possible, for the specific "hows" receive no further support and often die because one does not know what to do next.

---Establishes and maintains communication channels with agencies to extend the individual instructional programs needed

Since human support services in rural areas are often minimal, the special educator must determine the closest or most available agencies. Health services, rehabilitative services, deaf and blind services, social security, and welfare must be utilized when needed, and often the

special educator is the link. Child abuse is not just an urban phenomenon. Where and how does one get help? Where and how can one procure needed prosthetic devices and equipment? Are well baby clinics available? Does the lumbering, fishing, or mining employer provide support services? If so, what are they and how does one tap into them? What about legal services? A great deal of pride exists in rural families, so one must take this into consideration and build a trust relationship.

---Learns the decision-making process within the district and uses it to initiate support and/or change

One of the quickest ways to produce chaos and nonsupport is to operate in a way that is perceived as counterproductive to the decision-makers within the rural school and/or district. Fortunately, the channels are usually less bureaucratic, and one has access readily to the decision-makers. The special educator should communicate personal and professional needs in writing as well as verbally along with justification and support from research evidence if at all possible. The "planting seeds" strategy can be used when attempting to initiate change followed by careful nurturing of the planted idea. When presenting concerns and problems, one should try to have some alternative solutions to suggest. It may take time for action to be taken to address these. Rural special educators tend to become discouraged by the slowness of change.

---Functions as a team member of multidisciplinary teams (staffing, child study, and IEP)

Communication involves listening as well as speaking. One should have

a clear idea of what is to be communicated, but should be open to additional and different information. A willingness to change a position when it is warranted should be stressed. It is necessary to give as well as take. Learning to disagree in positive ways helps to promote better working relationships. At such meetings, one person may dominate. This type of thing can be quelled somewhat by asking for clarification and the avoidance of philosophical tirades or treatises centered around pet approaches. There is a tendency to use group meetings as "gossip" sessions. Sometimes, a summation of the reason for the meeting can help to assure tangible results.

---Functions as a team member when working with regular teachers

Montgomery (1978) offered some viable suggestions for working with regular teachers. He indicated that one should not function as an expert but as a professional peer. Active looking and listening were stressed as team efforts require that each member also be a learner. Regular teachers may be threatened by having someone invade their territory. The use of tact and diplomacy are very important. What one does not say may be more important than what one does say.

---Uses nontechnical language when working with teaching and support personnel

Technical terms usually mean little if anything to others. Frequent use of them with teachers, janitors, cooks, bus drivers, or secretaries only communicates one's idea of his/her own importance. Unsolicited advice is usually unwelcome and/or ignored. Support staff can be invaluable to one's program. For example, the janitor can help to construct needed supplies and equipment or rearrange the room. These

people should be treated with dignity and respect and their support and cooperation solicited for one's program.

VII. COORDINATION, COLLABORATION, AND CONSULTATION

---Coordinates the various related services

As previously mentioned, someone is responsible for collecting, translating, and using information from other professionals to develop programs for individuals. That someone is usually the special educator. Often, such services are not available in the district so are provided by regional or state personnel or on a contractual basis. They show the special educator what to do and that person implements the program. Of course, this requires close communication with them. One in turn, may need to teach other teachers and the parents these techniques and procedures to provide the intensive service that is needed.

---Coordinates regional community efforts and shares services, ideas, and strategies with other districts in the regional community

Often, the special educator is the liaison person for the school or district if it is a part of an intermediate educational unit (BOCES, IEU, IED, Cooperative). He/She becomes the logical contact person for the communication of the shared services, materials, and inservice training. One must coordinate the daily schedule so as to provide for regional personnel visits. A feedback system for needed instructional materials and equipment has to be established. The production of activities or "best practices" handbooks or resource guides to be used throughout the regional community involve coordinated input from all members of that community (Elliott, 1975).

---Coordinates the individual programs of integrated learners with regular teachers

Once the learner has been integrated (mainstreamed) for any portion of the day, it is absolutely vital that his/her program be coordinated with the regular teacher. Otherwise, fragmentation occurs, and the learner is often the loser. Integration may occur for social purposes as well as academic purposes. The regular teacher needs a support system; usually, the special educator becomes that system. Time has to be set aside for one to share information as to effective learning style, learning pace, skill level, strengths, and limitations and to plan and evaluate jointly. There is a shared responsibility, and each of the teachers has to determine for what aspect of the program he/she is responsible. Evans (1980) reported that more time needs to be allocated to consultation. Usually integration requires some adjustment on the part of the regular teacher's classroom routine and approach. The special educator may need to provide instructional materials and assist with curricular adaptation and classroom strategies. Again, Montgomery (1978) cautions that it is important not to play God, to be nonthreatening, to look and listen carefully, and to avoid the "free advice syndrome." One can expect a certain amount of discomfort but should avoid being drawn into the trap of doing the regular teacher's work for him/her.

---Provides consultation informally through discussions with teachers, administrators, and at staff meetings

Much consultation is informal. Teacher-initiated requests for information are more effective than "free advice." When requests occur,

one must weigh each request carefully and give it thought before responding. Recommendations and suggestions that don't work do not lead to confidence in the special educator's ability to help. Therefore, this person must look, listen, think, and/or get more information and then cooperatively develop a possible solution. A backup of alternative solutions should be developed in case difficulty is experienced with the suggested one. How to individualize instruction within the regular class appears to be one of the most prevalent requests.

---Conducts formal inservice training based upon needs assessment and request

Where special education services are new to the school or new programs are being initiated, the special educator may be called upon to present the information and/or training to school board members, parents, any teachers, or any group thereof. If the audience has a perceived need for the inservice, it is better received. Workshopping skills should be a part of the special educator's bag of tricks. It is wise to layer listening with "hands-on" activities and to schedule time for a question and answer session. One should avoid becoming defensive if attacked, and one can count on that happening at some point in time. Change rarely occurs without resistance, and resistance is a characteristic of rural areas. Change agents must recognize and accept it as part of the job.

---Coordinates paraprofessionals, peer tutors, and volunteers to provide more individualized assistance

Most of these helpers will need training in "how" to do what is

expected of them. Often, the "why" is as important as the "how." One should take the time to develop the needed skills at the onset of cooperative efforts for it is much easier on the helper's nerves and ego to instill them then than to have to constantly undermine the ongoing attempts. One builds with adults as well as with the students. Students often indicate a preference for the teacher until they learn that these helpers are teachers also. It is easier for the helper if he/she is made aware of the phenomenon and given some tips and hints to help in overcoming it. Since the helpers are community members, they will use the rural grapevine to share their concepts of the program. This makes it doubly important for one to interact in such a way that support is elicited. Retired people may be real assets for one's program. One becomes dependent upon the presence of the aides, tutors, and volunteers so it is important that they be dependable. They should inform the special educator at the earliest possible moment if they are unable to attend. Since they are team members, they should be included in the planning. Such inclusion generally results in more effective instruction as everyone knows where he/she is going. Some teachers plan aloud as a strategy to include the helpers in the daily instructional planning.

VIII. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RENEWAL

---Develops ways and means to continue and enhance professional growth and development

Often, special educators are reluctant to request assistance when they need it because of the "expert" role expectations. However, part

of professional renewal is in finding potential solutions for troublesome areas. One can use the professional consultants as resources for additional study; they will share or suggest reading lists. It is particularly helpful if time can be found later on where one can discuss the readings with the consultant. Sometimes, real "digging" is required when theoretical constructs and vocabulary are unfamiliar.

Another potential source for professional growth comes from the constructive criticism of supervisors and fellow teachers. Areas where growth is needed surface here. One may find it a bit shattering to the self-concept, but the perceptions of others do shed light as to some needed improvements. Along the same line, objective and critical self-analysis can unearth areas of particular interest or need. Areas that could be explored include one's philosophy of education, teaching strategies and techniques, management skills, attitudes, and areas of special interest or concern. The results of such a self-analysis can provide direction for further study as well as serve as intrinsic reinforcers.

Inservice training can also serve to provide professional development. Often, it is necessary to travel to procure such training as it may be conducted outside of the school district. The attitude with which one approaches such training usually has a bearing on the benefits received. There is always something that can be learned if one is looking for it. Unfortunately, not all inservice is challenging and stimulating, and educators as a group are very quick to find shortcomings and criticize. Professional conferences, workshops, and institutes can serve as generators.

In rural areas, there may be limited access to professional books and

journals. One may want to consider budgeting some time and money to spend in keeping abreast of current happenings and issues in special education. One could share this personal library with other regional special educators in an exchange program. Perhaps, regional exchange meetings could be arranged for the sharing of enthusiasm, ideas, and professional shop talk.

One should become affiliated with special education professional organizations. Such groups have many resources available and usually have journals germane to the field or a specialized categorical area. Often, books are available at a reduced cost through them. The use of instructional technology could bring expertise from all over the world to the rural areas.

---Develops ways and means to appreciate one's self, to relax and release tension, and to find satisfaction in one's personal life

One's personal life and one's professional life influence each other. When one aspect produces satisfaction, there is a carryover effect to the other. It is necessary to balance the two; trade offs occur. But one must have opportunities to "regenerate one's batteries" to be an effective special educator. Often, the rural setting places very real cultural and social constraints upon one. It then becomes necessary to learn to play in new ways. How does one maintain zeal and enthusiasm when there are minimal opportunities for input and little reinforcement?

The development of rewarding hobbies, interests, and activities can help. Some persons capitalize on nature, while others enjoy music, art, tinkering with cars, reading, or being a ham radio operator.

Opportunities for community involvement exist, but one may have to

actively seek them. Most communities have service clubs, sports enthusiasts, and church groups. By becoming involved in the community, the special educator has more opportunity to come into contact with others having similar interests. One may initiate activities such as Special Olympics, a square dance group, or a camping network as a means of personal satisfaction.

A common complaint is that rural communities do not accept outsiders readily. One strategy to counter this is to tap the local history, lore, crafts, whatever of the community to broaden one's own knowledge base. One can learn the culture of the area and participate to the desired extent if one will operate from the difference rather than deficient aspect.

Undoubtedly, some important competencies have been omitted. Furthermore, refinement of those listed must occur. Hopefully, continued effort on the part of special educators, administrators, parents, other teachers, and teacher educators will help in gathering evidence as to the requirements unique to the many diverse rural districts throughout this nation. A further need is the determination of measurement or evaluation strategies to apply to the listed competencies. Again, they have been offered to provoke thought. Teacher preparation efforts must encompass the rural areas as well as urban areas.

It would appear that cross-categorical approaches are a must for rural areas at the preservice level. Universities, regional centers, local school districts, and the state departments of education must conduct cooperative needs assessment, planning, and training to develop both appropriate preservice and inservice programs. Universities need to

consider the preparation of specialists for rural schools (Muse, 1977). Muse indicated that cooperative relationships would be needed to provide the necessary experiences. Field-based training centers would need to be established so that preservice students would have rural experiences in their preparation. Such centers could organize and manage provisions for observations, internships, teacher exchange programs, staff development retreats, student teaching experiences, and practicum experiences. Edington and Hays (1977) indicated that an intermediate education unit between the state and local level helps in the provision of specialized services to rural areas.

More attention in preservice preparation should be given to the following areas: better preparation in a broader range of subject matter areas; more practical, hand-on experiences in methods courses; learning to teach with minimum resources; learning to teach several age or developmental levels in one room; more intensive preparation in informal assessment techniques; more work in how to individualize instruction; courses in rural culture, rural economic systems, and sociology; inclusion of communication skills and consultation skills; more attention to guidance and counseling of students and adults; and some preparation in practical arts (carpentry, plumbing, and electricity).

It would seem that certification policies may hamper efforts to prepare and retain rural special educators. Approximately half of the states award specific categorical certificates, but a trend to reduce the number of different categories in special education was reported by Belch (1979). It would appear that regular educators should have

some special education courses in their preparation. With integration efforts and the fact that in rural areas the mildly handicapped spend most of their time in the regular classroom, it becomes a critical area for both elementary and secondary teachers. Too often, one hears "I don't know what to do with this one, this one, and that one. So, I let them sit, because they can't do anything."

In addition, administrators need exposure to special education. Special education competencies for administrators have been specified (Evans & Harris, 1975; Implementing Special Education, 1975; Nevin, 1979; Superintendents and Education, 1980). It would seem appropriate to require special education course work or competencies as part of certification requirements for regular teachers and general education administrators.

Inservice must be given a top priority in rural areas. As stated earlier, this is the avenue by which the special educator acquires the specialized skills he/she needs to work with the particular student population. This, too, needs to be a cooperative effort among universities, regional centers, professional consultants, local school districts, service agencies, and the state departments of education. Needs assessments should be conducted to determine priority needs. Universities will need to incorporate inservice training as part of the faculty teaching load. Ways to take the training to the field need to take priority over bringing the field to the university. The field-based training centers could take this role. Rude (1978, p. 176) conducted a nationwide survey to determine needed inservice training topics and found the following priority topics: (a) instructional

procedures/classroom management; (b) curriculum, programming, materials, resources; (c) identification, location, and referral of the handicapped learner; (d) least restrictive environment-alternative settings and determination of the most appropriate setting; (e) child evaluation procedures; (f) implementation of PL 94-142; (g) communication skills; and (h) coordination of services. Practical, experiential training was cited as the preferred mode. Support personnel to serve as onsite trainers could provide assistance for longer periods of time.

The rural special educator has a very complex role that he/she plays in the provision of services to exceptional learners. The above delineation of needed competencies for this individual clearly points this out. Competencies applied in a rural setting take on different meaning than when applied in urban areas. Further, competency specifications have direct implications for both preservice and inservice efforts. The need for quality rural special education services can no longer be denied; quality special educators play a major and critical role in the delivery of services to the exceptional learner. Hopefully, these quality special educators prepared to serve in rural areas can help to lessen the double disadvantage experienced by rural exceptional individuals and provide the impetus for more concentrated efforts for rural schools.

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